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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the principal sources and methods used by the Manpower Research and Information Branches of the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations (DEIR) to forecast the over or undersupply of librarians in Australia. After differentiating between manpower policy, planning, and forecasting, the role of the commonwealth government in manpower forecasting and the methodology of government-sponsored occupational research are described, with particular reference to professional librarians. It is noted that DEIR staff use data collected on their own occupational research forms supplemented by material from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), other government departments, and industry sources to compile information on: (1) workforce estimates; (2) the structure of the workforce; (3) the supply of librarians from training institutions and the percentage of graduates seeking employment; (4) current and future market demand; and (5) changes in demand. The final product of data collection and analysis is described as a prediction of the balance between expected worker supply and demand, made on the basis of a five-point scale ranging from shortage to oversupply. The conclusion to the paper notes that a minor oversupply of professional librarians is predicted in the July 1982 "Employment Prospects by Industry and Occupation," but a reduction in student intake by library schools is not recommended. (ESR)

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OCCUPATIONAL FORECASTING OF LIBRARIANS IN AUSTRALIA

by

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In 1974 the Western Australian Branch of the Library Association of Australia together with the Western Australian Institute of Technology published a comprehensive report on an investigation into the supply of and demand for professional librarians in W.A.(1) Included in the early part of the report were two prophetic statements. The first was that "... high level political decisions may cause radical changes in the pace of library development almost overnight".(2) The second was that "... developments (from May 1974) onwards may make any part of the report invalid".(3) Both statements are as true today as they were when they were made eight years ago. Within months of the publication of the above report the boom was lowered on funding in the public sector. And I do not consider it to be overstating the case when I believe the ramifications of those early funding decisions are still being felt today in the library profession, among others.

The considerable variance between the prognoses of the researchers of the report and the eventuality was no fault of their own. It was due more to the unpredictability of the politician, defined anonymously as an animal who can sit on the fence and yet keep both ears to the ground. Whilst I would consider the last decade of domestic politics as a period of relative excitement, it could also be said that it was atypical. Atypical because the Australian community saw unprecedented growth in funding of the education sector in the first half of the decade, and a virtual freeze on real growth in the second half. Both periods caught the breath of educators, employers, and the community in general. But the stop-go-stop funding movements have taught us all a sound, albeit cynical, lesson in basic economics. The caution now exhibited by educationists, including those in library schools, could perhaps be having a disproportionate effect on their efficacy, because educationists are caught in a bind of their own. Staff numbers in library schools depend primarily on the number of equivalent full-time students ("EFTS") and educators for librarianship often have a vested interest in staff numbers in subject departments. It is an issue which has prompted one senior librarian to refer to "... the indecent but all important struggle for student numbers".(4)

The Commonwealth Government, together with research economists in academia, has neglected in-depth and continuous research into the issue of manpower planning in Australia. Professor John Niland (5) in the report of the Williams Committee refers to the meagre effort of Australia in the field of manpower research. Niland refers to the Australian manpower scene in 1979 being "rather similar to that in the United States about 1962". A significant step by the Commonwealth Government was taken in 1973 when the Australian Inter-departmental Mission to Study Overseas Manpower and Industry Policies and Programs set out to learn from the experience of other countries. But five years later, Niland could still comment that "Australia lacks any identifiable manpower awareness".(6) It was not until December 1979 that a Commonwealth Government decided to establish a formal organisation to rectify the lack of awareness and advice available to it in manpower issues.(7) The then Minister for Employment and Youth Affairs provided a press release on 4 December 1979 in which he outlined the Government's intention to establish a Bureau for Labour Market Research. The Minister said that "the Williams Report on Education and Training made the specific recommendation that the Department of Employment and Youth Affairs acquire a research

capacity and sponsor research on manpower studies - one of 13 recommendations for manpower research, analysis and forecasting made by the Committee".(8) The Bureau was to be part of the Minister's Department and it was to be responsible for "a program of research and analysis aimed at improving understanding of labour market operations as a basis for developing manpower policies and programs".(9) The Bureau of Labour Market Research is currently located in Canberra and is intended to have a staff of approximately fifty people. Meanwhile each State capital city has a regional office of the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations (formerly Department of Employment and Youth Affairs) in which is incorporated a Manpower Research and Information Branch (M.R. and I). It is these Branches in each State office which contribute most to the documented material available which informs the community on job prospects for specific occupations and in certain industries. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the manpower assessment activities of the Branch.

It is important to differentiate between "manpower policy", "manpower planning" and "manpower forecasting". For the purposes of this paper, I propose to use Professor Niland's differentiations:(10)

1) "Manpower Policy" - is an integrated set of acts to raise labour productivity through the rational development and deployment of human resources, subject to a set of clearly specified social and other non-economic constraints.

2) "Manpower Planning" - is the process by which different policy goals and policy options are established. It also involves determination of just how manpower projections and forecasts will be used.

3) "Manpower Forecasting" - takes account of different policy options for arriving at future levels of demand and/or supply.

The Role Of The Commonwealth Government

It can be seen that essentially political decisions determine "manpower policy" and "manpower planning". Staff of the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations (D.E.I.R.) within the M.R. and I. Branches essentially undertake the research, collect and analyse data, and compile the reports, which form the main basis of the Department's publication Employment Prospects by Industry and Occupation. Included in these reports are forecasts relating to immigration and training issues. These assist in determining whether the local labour supply could be significantly affected by migrants entering Australia with certain skills, or whether specific training programs could remedy skill shortfalls in particular occupations.

Within M.R. and I. Branches are several interrelated sections:

i) Industry Policy (IP).

ii) Labour Market Analysis (LMA).

iii) Manpower and Economic Research (MER).

Apart from their ongoing responsibilities the above sections occcasionally undertake joint projects. This facilitates co-operation and consultation between sections and an exchange of research data such as labour market information, material from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), and other Commonwealth and State Government departments. It is the responsibility of the M.E.R. section within the M.R. and I. Branch to compile the occupational research form, a pro-forma which is standard across Australia within the Department. This form was first introduced in late 1979. Prior to this time, a less sophisticated report on each occupation was compiled in prose form supplemented by relevant data from the A.B.S. or industry sources. The former reports included a job definition, entry characteristics, employment characteristics, and a labour market assessment and forecast. Despite their relative lack of sophistication, the reports not only sought input from sources such as employer organisations, professional associations (such as the L.A.A.), and education authorities, but their forecasts have proved to be substantially correct.

The frequency of occupational reviews undertaken by the M.E.R. section depends on a number of factors, such as whether it is a resource-based occupation (mining engineers, welders, plant operators, etc.) or an occupation experiencing significant "structural adjustment". Approximately 120 to 150 occupations are reviewed annually, together with special projects on, say, semi-skilled occupations, particular industry sector activity influencing employment, and reviews of those occupations being focussed upon due to immigration issues.

Reports from M.R. and I. Branches around Australia are compiled in the Central Office of the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations and it is Central Office which is responsible for compiling the publication, Employment Prospects by Industry and Occupation. There have been occasions when the Central Office summary has differed from that of a State office of the Department. Some occupational groups in Australia have held views contrary to that of the Government on labour market assessments and have lobbied Federal Cabinet to put their points of view. Such groups included medical practitioners, dental surgeons, and chemists, and it is their respective professional associations which have sought to influence Cabinet, especially in relation to entry to Australia of professional persons.

Methodology Of Occupational Research With Particular Reference To Professional Librarians

As mentioned earlier D.E.I.R. does not undertake manpower planning, per se. It aims to provide "... broad occupational assessments to assist in formulating and administering aspects of training and immigration policy, vocational guidance, (and) labour market research"... (11)

These aims are reflected in the design of the methodology of occupational research. I do not propose to examine or explain each paragraph of the occupational research form but rather to illustrate the depths to which individual researchers go, considering time and funding constraints.

Workforce Estimates

Industry contacts, employers, and A.B.S. Census data are the main sources used in determining the size of the workforce. Membership figures of the Library Association of Australia are not considered accurate enough due to two main factors:

i) the uncertainty of the percentage of members not currently in the workforce, and

ii) membership of the L.A.A. is not compulsory.

Structure Of The Workforce

A.B.S. Census figures provide the age groupings of librarians in the workforce (and, of course, those not currently in the workforce - you do not have to be in employment to complete and submit your Census form).

A.B.S. data also provides information on the following:

i) Male/female ratio of librarians.

ii) Employer/self employed or employee status.

iii) Full-time/part-time status.

iv) Geographic location of the librarian workforce.

v) Industry location - using the Australian Standard Industry Classification (ASIC) code.

As well as tabulating the above data, comments are provided to clarify certain structural characteristics such as age and sex distribution, part-time employment, and industries worthy of consideration as "growth areas" for libraries.

Training Format

One area from where very accurate data can be obtained is training institutions. This being the case, "formal" supply can be easily tabulated. However not all of the "formal" supply seeks immediate entry into the workforce on completion of training. Surveys by training or educational institutions such as W.A.I.T.'s Careers Advisory Unit provide figures illustrating what percentages of graduates, at a certain time after completion of their courses, do not seek to enter the labour market as they may be already employed or not seeking full-time employment.

An explanation of the supply statistics is provided, with reference to characteristics relevant to the library profession. These include comments regarding the age of trainees, competitiveness in the labour market, and consideration of C.E.S. unemployment statistics.

Current Market Demand

Consideration is given to the number of librarians registered as unemployed with the C.E.S. (the Professional Employment Office having been disbanded in 1981) and response to job advertisements. Figures showing the ratio of job applicants with library experience to those applicants without library experience can indicate a "reserve" pool of qualified librarians either working in other occupations or not participating in the labour market. Industry contacts provide valuable information regarding the nature of market demand, e.g. whether it is generally of a replacement nature or is indicative of a change in policy or emphasis within the employing institutions.

Future Demand

Occupational researchers are required to raise with employers issues such as "likely trends in demand", economic factors, technological change, legislative change, and demographic change. With almost all employed librarians being in the public funding sector this summary is, perhaps, the most challenging!

Estimates Of Demand Growth

Such estimates consider whether there will be any movement in demand growth for librarians over, say, a five year period when considering the needs fo the community for library services.

Summary Assessment

An overall assessment of the current scenario for librarians is provided with special reference to notable labour market characteristics, such as:

i) The number of graduates compared with job vacancies.

ii) The ratio of lower-level professional positions vis-a-vis senior vacancies.

iii) Wastage from the labour market (for whatever reason).

An assessment will then be made as to whether the labour market will be one of shortage, minor shortage, minor oversupply, oversupply, or an expected balance between the supply of and demand for workers. The assessments are considered accurate for the training period of specific occupations, e.g. for librarians the period would be approximately three years.

At the time of writing the most recent edition of Employment Prospects By Industry and Occupation was that published in July 1982. The entry for librarians(12) as with other occupations included in the book, includes an "SVP" rating, in this case "SVP 7". SVP stands for Specific Vocational Preparation and it derives from the Canadian Classification of Dictionary of Occupations (CCDO). "Specific

Vocational Preparation is measured by the amount of time needed to acquire the information, techniques, and skills needed for average work performance in a specific occupation" (13) SVP 7 translates as "Level 7", i.e. over two years up to and including four years. The [illegible] was influential in the emergence of the Australian Standard Classification of Occupations (ASCO) currently being developed as a joint D.E.Y.A. and A.B.S. project. The two main official occupational classifications currently in use are the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) system used, inter alia, for matching persons seeking employment with job vacancies lodged with the C.E.S., and the A.B.S. system used in the presentation of population census information, labour force surveys, and other statistical compilations.(14) The use of A.S.C.O. is expected to lead to better labour market analysis as well as better manpower forecasting. (15)

Conclusion

Early in the paper I made reference to the manpower planning, manpower policy, and manpower forecasting. It can be seen that a host of factors contribute to the supply and demand conundrum, and it would be neither fair nor reasonable to expect any Government authority to provide the community with anything more than their current estimates on a five-point ordinal scale ranging from "shortage" through to "oversupply".

At the 52nd ANZAAS Congress held in Sydney in May this year one speaker stated that "the forecasting process itself in respect of most occupations can do little more than arrive at broad trends and magnitudes. Anything more specific would imply a knowledge of future economic trends and of the sum of many individual decisions that is not available". (16)

Despite the present "minor oversupply" of professional librarians in Australia (to quote the latest DEYA assessment) it could be considered both hasty and short-sighted to reduce intakes of students of librarianship. Coughlan(17) believes for "a range of reasons we should continue to be cautious of reducing educational opportunity in response to short-term trends in the labour market". He goes on to quote the Tertiary Education Commission Report for the 1982-84 Triennium:

> "... Given the impossibility of achieving a precise balance between supply and demand on a continuing basis, it is preferable to accept some imbalance in the short term rather than to impart instability to the intakes to tertiary courses. In pursuing this objective, the Commission believes that a current oversupply, or the probability of some future over-supply, is to be preferred to the risk of shortages of trained manpower, and therefore is cautious in proposing reductions in intakes to particular course..." (18)

No consideration has been given here to the qualitative aspects of the supply of librarians. Indeed, in Australia, "librarians" are in statistical circles all things to all men. No in-depth consideration is given to matching librarians with specific skills with particular

jobs - in an occupational assessment context. One hundred librarians seeking employment and one hundred librarianship vacancies does not necessarily imply a balanced labour market. It is hoped that both qualitative and quantitative aspects of librarian manpower could be integrated into future occupational assessment methodologies.

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